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Testimony before the
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

By
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Regarding
Raised Bill No. 344- An Act Concerning the Upgrade or Elimination of Hazardous
Railroad Crossings At Grade

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Chairman Defronzo, Chairman Guerra and members of the Committee I appreciate having the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Housatonic Railroad in support of Raised Bill No 344, An Act Concerning the Upgrade or Elimination of Hazardous Railroad Crossings At Grade.

The Housatonic Railroad has 45 public at grade crossings on the railroad and nearly all of them are at or near the point of replacement or repair. For many years crossings in Connecticut were replaced or resurfaced under federal programs that provided states with funds specifically targeted for crossing renewal. At some point we believe in the late 1990's funding for transportation projects including crossings was changed from a program specific approach to a broader block grant approach. While that approach makes sense as it provides states more flexibility in how they maintain their networks it also appears to have encouraged Connecticut to assign a very low priority to crossing repair on freight railroads within the state. In fact the last crossing project that was funded with a combination of state and federal funds on the Housatonic was completed in 1998. At that rate on our railroad we will be replacing crossings at the rate of one every 540 years. Simplistically we are losing the war.

Damage to at grade crossings, including rail infrastructure, is caused by state snow plows, the use of highly conductive ice melting material that corrodes rail and causes signals to fail, and impact loads from heavy trucks. In fact in one recent test at railroad test facilities in Pueblo, Colorado the rail components of highway at grade crossings remained serviceable even after being exposed to 200 million gross tons of rail traffic. If you applied that test to the tonnages we run on our railroad, our crossings should last 50 years or more. In fact they are lasting about 12. Crossings and in particular crossing surfaces simply can't take the pounding they get from plows, salt and heavy trucks.

In Connecticut the majority of locations where public roads and highways cross rail lines at grade are on rail lines that carry freight only. Passenger trains that carry commuters operate over publicly owned rail lines and Amtrak operates entirely over lines owned by Amtrak or the state of Connecticut. The number of locations at which public roads cross railroad tracks at grade on Amtrak owned lines have been significantly reduced. Crossings do still exist primarily on Amtrak's New Haven, Hartford line, in very few

locations on the Northeast corridor and on branch lines used by rail commuter services. Generally crossing surfaces on passenger lines are well maintained by public authorities. Unfortunately maintenance and repair of crossings over freight lines have been neglected by the Department, even in cases where the state road on either side of a failed crossing has been maintained or upgraded.

When most laws that impact railroads and crossings in Connecticut were originally passed, railroads accounted for most of the transportation for passengers and freight in the state. Crossings were built to accommodate very frequent trains and the occasional horse drawn wagon or automobile traveling at 10 mph. Today railroads carry about 5% of freight moving in the state, though we are working to improve that ratio, and the majority moves by truck. The overwhelmingly dominant user of at grade crossings are vehicles on the highways, not railroads.

The Housatonic Railroad, like most railroads in the state took over rail lines that were rejected by larger national carriers. We have worked hard to rebuild our freight services and we continue to work hard to attract new business and support Connecticut industries. On our railroad we have spent approximately 25% of our maintenance budget to maintain crossings as we also work to offset many years of deferred maintenance by predecessor owners. We simply can't fix failed crossings and maintain highway surfaces, essentially for our competitors, and adequately invest in our own track and structures. Railroad resources, if used for crossing maintenance, are diverted away from our tracks causing long term decline in the quality of freight railroads in the state.

Highway grade crossings in Connecticut have essentially become orphans. Railroads must focus their resources on maintaining their track. Public funds that were once available for crossing repair and renewal appear to have been diverted to other purposes and crossings across the state are in trouble. No one is addressing the problem.

The proposed legislation reflects the reality of rail transportation today and addresses the problem of failed crossings across the state. Just as the state addressed the problem of orphan bridges a number of years ago, Raised Bill 344 addresses the problems we now have with orphan crossings. We appreciate the efforts of the bill's sponsors and the committee and we support the bill.